

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

FOREIGN SERVICE SPECIALIST

ORAL ASSESSMENT STUDY GUIDE

- ✓ Composure
- ✓ Cultural Adaptability
- ✓ Experience and Motivation
- ✓ Information Integration and Analysis
- ✓ Initiative and Leadership
- ✓ Judgment
- ✓ Objectivity and Integrity
- ✓ Oral Communication
- ✓ Planning and Organizing
- ✓ Resourcefulness
- ✓ Working With Others
- ✓ Written Communication



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Foreign Service Specialist

Oral Assessment Study Guide

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Introduction

The Foreign Service is a unique career and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the selection process is also unique. The purpose of the “Guide to the Foreign Service Specialist Oral Assessment (FSS OA)” is to help familiarize candidates with the selection process so that they will be able to better focus on their own performance during the oral assessment rather than spend their limited time reviewing procedures. While the main elements of the FSS OA remain constant, information on details – for example, time limits or speaking order – can change quickly. Candidates should stay alert and follow the instructions provided on the day of the Oral Assessment.

This guide includes the criteria used to evaluate candidates, common sense strategies candidates might use to ensure they are performing their best, a description of the activities during the FSS OA, sample Case Management materials, as well as information on required clearances (in case the candidate passes the FSS OA), language testing, veterans’ points, and final observations.

The sample test materials in this guide represent the kind of information and exercises candidates in specialist career tracks will be given during the oral exam. The specialist tracks fall into eight major categories: administration, construction engineering, facility management, information technology, international information and English language programs, medical and health, office management, and security. Not every specialist category uses exactly the same OA format, so you should review the description for your particular specialty. This guide is for the FSS OA only – other guides are available for Foreign Service Officer candidates, such as the FSOT Study Guide and the FSOA Study Guide. Candidates should check with careers.state.gov for general information on a Foreign Service Career, as well as details on the next steps after a successful oral assessment. The careers.state.gov website also offers information on Foreign Service Officer careers, Civil Service careers, professional fellowship opportunities, Limited Non-Career Appointments, and student/intern programs.

The Foreign Service Selection Process

The Foreign Service assessment process, including the Qualification Evaluations Panel (QEP) and the oral assessment, is an employment selection tool used by the Department of State to identify the most qualified candidates for Foreign Service positions. In other words, it is a hiring process. Therefore, the nature and purpose of the assessment process are different from those of educational testing.

In education, assessment focuses on “mastery testing” and the goal is to determine if the student possesses sufficient knowledge or skill to pass a course. The assessments are usually comprehensive, covering the entire body of required knowledge or skill. The scores verify current competence and command of a definite skill set. Such assessments are often

accompanied by extensive feedback, and possibly remedial training and reassessment, with the ultimate objective of passing. It is not a competition because everyone should pass.

In employment selection, the goal is to determine which candidates are the most qualified because an organization wants to hire the best. These assessments only sample a job-related body of knowledge or skills because assessment time is limited. The scores are predictors of future job performance, rather than indicators of current competence. Thus, tests like the oral assessment are not accompanied by extensive feedback or remedial training because they are not meant to measure an entire body of knowledge or skills. Moreover, the organization's hiring process is meant to be highly selective given the limited number of openings available.

The Oral Assessment Process

Before the Assessment

Oral Assessments are generally held in Washington, DC and – budget and schedule permitting – other domestic locations in the United States. Once candidates schedule their FSS OA, they should make travel and lodging plans.

- Be rested. Candidates who are tired cannot possibly be at their best – taking the FSS OA can be a stressful experience, and candidates need to be “present” at all times during the day.
- Candidates traveling from out of town should plan to arrive at least a day in advance; candidates traveling from overseas should give themselves at least two days.
- Make allowances for delayed flights, lost luggage, broken down metro trains, stalled rush hour traffic, and taxi drivers who can't find the test center address.
- The day prior to the test, candidates should locate the test center and make sure they are familiar with how to get there.
- Do not spend the night prior to the FSS OA studying; the extra factoids candidates might cram into their brains at this point will not make a significant difference. Visit a museum, go out to a movie, visit with friends – and get to bed at a decent hour (see “Be rested” above).

The FSS OA is a job interview; candidates will want to dress for it. Men normally wear suits and ties; women wear the professional equivalent.

- That said, candidates need not go out and spend money on a new suit for the assessment. An outfit that is neat and professional is fine. It does not have to be this year's fashion. It does not have to be black, navy or grey.
- New shoes are actively discouraged. It's going to be a long day, so wear something comfortable.

The test day is tightly choreographed, so it is essential to be on time and in the right place.

Oral Assessment Summary

Candidates must report to their assigned Assessment Center no later than the time indicated in their invitation letter or e-mail. Candidates arriving late may be refused entry to the assessment. Almost all specialist assessments are conducted in the Washington, DC area. The invitation will specify where it will take place. The assessment itself may take three to five hours for successful candidates so candidates should plan their return trip accordingly. The email message that invites candidates to the Oral Assessment also advises candidates what documents they need to bring to the Assessment Center. This list of documents can be found in the Department of State's careers.state.gov website under the Selection Process heading. It is also provided in the letter inviting candidates to the Oral Assessment. Diplomatic Security candidates will only fill out the SF86 if they pass the written and oral assessments and extended a conditional offer.. In addition to the listed documents, candidates are also asked to bring the Social Security numbers and dates of birth of family members who might be traveling with them overseas – this will help the medical clearance process. We will try to arrange provisions (known as “Reasonable Accommodations”) for candidates with disabilities at the requested Assessment Center but they must be arranged with the U.S. Department of State's Board of Examiners at least one week in advance – please see our website for the most updated information, as requirements may change. Candidates are allowed to bring snacks, sandwiches, coffee and/or soft drinks to the Assessment. Some individuals might wish to bring reading material or a deck of cards to pass the time between exam modules. Water will be available at the Assessment Center. There is secure space to store coats, purses, electronic gear, and any luggage at the Assessment Center.

The Specialist Oral Assessment measures the following 12 dimensions:

- **Composure.** To stay calm, poised, and effective in stressful or difficult situations; to think on one's feet, adjusting quickly to changing situations; to maintain self-control.
- **Cultural Adaptability.** To work and communicate effectively and harmoniously with persons of other cultures, value systems, political beliefs, and economic circumstances; to recognize and respect differences in new and different cultural environments.
- **Experience and Motivation.** To demonstrate knowledge, skills or other attributes gained from previous experience of relevance to the Foreign Service; to articulate appropriate motivation for joining the Foreign Service.
- **Information Integration and Analysis.** To absorb and retain complex information drawn from a variety of sources; to draw reasoned conclusions from analysis and synthesis of available information; to evaluate the importance, reliability, and usefulness of information; to remember details of a meeting or an event without the benefit of notes.
- **Initiative and Leadership.** To recognize and assume responsibility for work that needs to be done; to persist in the completion of a task; to influence significantly a group's

activity, direction or opinion; to motivate others to participate in the activity one is leading.

- **Judgment.** To discern what is appropriate, practical, and realistic in a given situation; to weigh relative merits of competing demands.
- **Objectivity and Integrity.** To be fair and honest; to avoid deceit, favoritism, and discrimination; to present issues frankly and fully, without injecting subjective bias; to work without letting personal bias prejudice actions.
- **Oral Communication.** To speak fluently in a concise, grammatically correct, organized, precise, and persuasive manner; to convey nuances of meaning accurately; to use appropriate styles of communication to fit the audience and purpose.
- **Planning and Organizing.** To prioritize and order tasks effectively, to employ a systematic approach to achieving objectives, to make appropriate use of limited resources.
- **Resourcefulness.** To formulate creative alternatives or solutions to resolve problems, to show flexibility in response to unanticipated circumstances.
- **Working With Others.** To interact in a constructive, cooperative, and harmonious manner; to work effectively as a team player; to establish positive relationships and gain the confidence of others; to use humor as appropriate.
- **Written Communication.** To write concise, well organized, grammatically correct, effective and persuasive English in a limited amount of time.

The 12 dimensions are the core of the Foreign Service Oral Assessment process. Candidates are encouraged to read the definitions of the 12 dimensions carefully, and to spend some time thinking about what they mean. While the definition of leadership, for example, may seem obvious, it is unlikely that the average person in the street would focus on the same aspects of leadership as those highlighted by the Department's definition.

Candidates are evaluated solely against these criteria by two assessors who observe the performance of candidates in a variety of situations designed to enable the candidates to demonstrate the requisite skills. Generally the assessors are Foreign Service Officers from various career tracks and Foreign Service Specialists with expertise in the specialty for which the candidate is applying. Assessors receive training from professional consultants on how to conduct assessments in an objective manner. They learn how to observe the candidate's performance and how to correlate the candidate's performance with an established performance standard.

The Oral Assessment is not an adversarial process. Candidates are not competing against other applicants for the same position but are judged on their capacity to demonstrate skills and abilities necessary to be an effective Foreign Service Specialist.

The Oral Assessment for non-Diplomatic Security Positions

1. Case Management

All writing exercises are done on a computer using Microsoft Word.

As the first part of the Oral Assessment you will be given a scenario describing issues which may typically arise in your specialty in a Foreign Service context. You will be asked to write a 1-2 page memo to your supervisor summarizing the situation and providing solutions to the problems you or your supervisor has identified. You do not need to know US Government or State Department rules and regulations – you should rely on your expert knowledge, information presented to you, and your common sense. You will have 45 minutes to complete this section.

2. Online Competency Exam

You will next be given an online competency exam. You will have 45-60 minutes for this section. The test may include English Expression questions, questions dealing with your ability to work with others, and questions appropriate to your area of expertise, such as Microsoft usage; IT problems; hiring laws and procedures; organizing events and VIP schedules; building maintenance issues; contracting and leasing; logistics operations; budgets and accounting; and similar issues that you will be expected to work within your FS specialty.

This computer based multiple-choice exam presents a series of technical and/or situational judgment questions. It is intended to measure your job-related knowledge and how you might apply that knowledge on the job. The exam is designed to present more questions than can generally be answered in the time allowed, so candidates should not expect to answer every question.

3. The Structured Interview

All candidates participate individually in a Structured Interview conducted by two assessors, one of whom will be a Subject Matter Expert proficient in the functional field being tested. For this portion of the Oral Assessment, assessors will have reviewed portions of your application for employment so they will be familiar with your work history and information you provided in the biographical section of the application. You are expected to respond to questions based on your personal background, experience, and motivation. You should be careful to respond to the questions that are asked, rather than give a response that highlights your qualities or resume but does not reply to the specific question.

You should expect assessors to remain stone-faced throughout the interview. They have been instructed to not provide any clues – including non-verbal ones – about how you are doing. This

does not mean that assessors may not be impressed with something you say or feel empathy if you are struggling – they just will not express it. During the Structured Interview, assessors may interrupt you, shuffle papers, or cut short your answers. You should not assume that this signals anything either positive or negative. The assessors may be watching the clock or may believe that they have heard all they need to on a given subject and move on.

The Structured Interview portion of the assessment consists of three testing modules lasting approximately one hour.

A. Experience and Motivation Interview

In this portion of the Structured Interview, you should convey to the examiners a clear and precise picture of yourself, including personality traits, and your understanding of the Foreign Service. Your expressed motivation to join the Foreign Service, education and work experience as well as cross-cultural skills are considered. Assessors will evaluate your potential to serve successfully as a Foreign Service Specialist. You must be succinct and persuasive in responding to the examiner's questions. It is helpful to have previously informed yourself about the Foreign Service in general, and also about the work related to the specialty you have selected.

Whenever possible and appropriate, you should go beyond just a “what” explanation, and also give the “how” and “why.” You should remember that you need to do more than describe your experiences; you need to explain what you learned from them and why they are predictive of success in the Foreign Service. You may be interrupted as assessors probe for details and manage the time. This is normal.

B. Hypothetical Scenarios

The second assessment module in the Structured Interview consists of a series of hypothetical scenarios designed to test the candidate's situational judgment.

Dimensions scored during this exercise include: Planning and Organization, Working with Others, Cultural Adaptability, Initiative and Leadership, Judgment, Objectivity and Integrity, Information Integration and Analysis, Resourcefulness, and Composure. Although the problems presented in this exercise are hypothetical, they are closely related to real-life situations regularly encountered by Foreign Service Specialists overseas. You are advised, however, that, while the problems occur in a Foreign Service setting, you are not expected to know how an Embassy operates or to be familiar with government rules and regulations. Rather, you are asked to fashion a solution that employs good judgment, knowledge of your specialty, and common sense.

The hypothetical scenarios challenge candidates to think quickly. Assessors look for a candidate who can organize for action, take responsibility, and respond to new situations creatively and

effectively. While there is no single right or correct answer, a strong candidate will demonstrate mature thinking, recognize alternative approaches, and consider both the long- and short-term consequences of responses. In responding to these questions, you should:

- Be as thorough and complete as you can be in their approach to solving the problem;
- Make sure you have covered the most important courses of action before the examiner moves on; and
- Consider more than one possible course of action.

You should not respond by throwing the hot potato into someone else's hands – the potato is yours to deal with, and you should use all the available resources. Candidates should recognize their level of authority and use it to the full extent, but not exceed it.

Sample Hypothetical Exercise

Below we present several hypothetical questions of the type used for different specialist career tracks:

1. You are the General Services Officer (GSO) at a medium-sized Consulate in a developing country. You depend on the Embassy for most supplies such as office equipment, expendable supplies, and household furnishings. Your requests for supplies meet with indifference and frequent denials. How would you establish better relations with your Embassy counterparts and improve the support for your post?
2. You are a courier escorting three classified pouches to a neighboring post. Upon arrival, you find only the locally employed Embassy driver meets you at the airport. He does not have a security clearance and you may not hand the pouches over to him. What do you do?
3. You are the Financial Management Officer (FMO) at a large Embassy. You discover that one of the section heads has purchased expensive coffee table books to give to his contacts as holiday presents. He did not go through the regular procurement procedures and now wants you to reimburse him the several hundred dollars he spent on these books. What do you do?
4. You are the regional Human Resources Officer (HRO) for several posts. One post has never had an employee handbook, another does not follow any standard procedures for hiring new employees, and at a third one local employees threaten to take a "job action" to protest their lack of pay increases for the past three years. Visiting each of these posts requires two days of travel and time on the ground. How would you approach these problems?

5. You are the health care provider at your post. The Ambassador wants you to notify her every time an employee is too sick to come to work so she may send him get-well greetings. What do you do?
6. You are the OMS in the Management Section of a medium-size embassy. Many of your coworkers come to your boss with requests that they feel have not been addressed by other embassy sections. Some of these coworkers have come to believe that you have influence over your boss's decisions whether to approve their requests and raise their problems with you during social events such as shopping trips or community picnics. How do you respond to these approaches?
7. You are the security officer at a small embassy in a developing country. The Assistant Secretary for your region will be spending two days in your capital next week and his staff requests your recommendations for a safe and secure location for his stay. What do you do?

C. Past Behavior Interview

In the final segment of the Structured Interview, the assessors ask the candidate a series of questions to which the candidate should respond with examples from his or her own experience. The questions are designed to assess a range of dimensions determined through a documented job analysis to be linked to successful performance as a Foreign Service Specialist. Candidates will be given a question sheet containing the different dimensions being assessed during this portion of the interview, with two questions listed under each dimension. Candidates will have five minutes to select the question they wish to discuss for each dimension (one question for each dimension) and to prepare their responses. Candidates' examples should be appropriate and drawn from their own experience. During this portion of the Structure Interview, candidates should:

- Be sure their responses relate directly to the dimension; if the response does not answer the question, the candidate will be low ranked;
- Use responses that demonstrate their best achievement in the specific dimension – candidates should avoid responses that document themselves as failures;
- Even when talking about a group project, make sure they emphasize what they did. Candidates should choose examples in which their role demonstrates the dimension being assessed.

The dimensions rated in this section of the Structured Interview are Planning and Organizing, Working with Others, Cultural Adaptability, Initiative and Leadership, Objectivity and Integrity, Composure, and Oral Communication.

Evaluating the Three Exercises

Assessors observe the candidate's performance closely and individually enter their scores for the written (Case Management) exercise and the Structured Interview into a computer spreadsheet. The score for the skills assessment is automatically computed as soon as the candidate completes that section and is entered into the master score sheet. The average of the three exercises determines a candidate's overall score. The Skills Assessment, Structured Interview, and Case Management Study each count for one-third of the total grade. The Oral Assessment cut-off to continue a candidacy is 5.25 out of a possible 7. Within the Structured Interview, the Experience and Motivation, Hypothetical and Past Behavior modules are equally weighted. Overall scoring is on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing poor performance and 7 representing an outstanding performance.

Selection and Assessment Procedures for Candidates for Diplomatic Security (DS) Positions (Diplomatic Courier, Security Engineering, Security Technical Specialist, Special Agent, Security Protective Specialist):

For Special Agent candidates testing is conducted in a DS facility in Arlington, VA, and at other locations in the continental United States.

The assessment for Special Agent candidates consists of four components and applicants must be successful in each phase to proceed to the next. All candidates will go through the first two components which examine the applicant's skill set through a written, multiple choice examination followed by a brief oral examination. The multiple-choice examination is 20 minutes in which 32 questions must be answered. This is followed by an oral interview which provides the applicant the opportunity to provide examples of the type of experience claimed on the written exam. This is administered by two DS Special Agents and lasts for 25 minutes.

If successful, the candidate moves on to the third phase (Case Study) and is required to write a report based upon a scenario. Several problems are outlined in a written document and the applicant must write a report in which he/she presents the solution to each problem and properly prioritizes the sequence in which each problem is to be addressed. The report is written utilizing a laptop computer and evaluated by the Examination Team. Candidates are given 45 minutes to complete this phase. The finished report is graded on the basis of writing skills, judgment and information integration. Writing skills include proper grammar, spelling, logic, organization, vocabulary, focus, flow and cohesion. Applicants must also demonstrate an understanding of the broader implications of the problems presented and the judgment to properly prioritize their solution.

If successful, the applicant moves to the fourth and final phase – the Structured Interview – which is a 45-50 minute interview conducted by a member of the Foreign Service Board of Examiners and a DS Special Agent. Areas addressed include motivation for the position; cross-

cultural experiences; objectivity and integrity; inter-personal skills and breadth of knowledge. The latter component includes questions on American history; the US Government; American culture and current events. The examination also includes three scenarios in which the applicant must present a solution to the problems presented. Judgment, leadership, resourcefulness, organizational skills and initiative are some of the criteria examined. Throughout the examination, the applicant is graded upon oral communications skills and composure.

Security Engineering Officers, Diplomatic Couriers, Security Technical Specialists, and Security Protective Specialists do not take an on-line examination, but must apply online to an open vacancy announcement. Candidates who submit a complete application package by the closing date of the announcement, meet the minimum qualifications and cut score, will be invited to the written and oral assessments. Testing is conducted in a facility in Arlington, VA.

For Security Engineering Officers and Security Technical Specialists, in lieu of the multiple choice questionnaire, they are given an electronics type multiple choice assessment. SEOs will have 25 minutes and STS's will have 35 minutes to complete this phase.

For Diplomatic Courier candidates who make it to phase three will be given a list of topics to choose from to draft an essay. They do not complete the case study exercise. The scoring criteria remains the same as the case study.

Security Protective Specialist candidates are only given the written essay and if successful in the writing, proceed forward to the Structured interview.

All successful candidates then go on to the Structured Interview as described in the Special Agent section above.

4. Exit Interviews

After the assessors complete the integration of their scores, they notify candidates whether they have been successful in reaching the cut-off. Along with their final overall score, candidates learn whether they reached or exceeded the cut off on any of the three major components of the assessment. DS candidates are only informed whether they passed or were found not competitive.

Unsuccessful candidates are informed of their results in a private interview with two assessors. At this point, the candidate is given an opportunity to ask general questions about the assessment process or future exams. Assessors are not permitted to provide specific feedback or critiques of the candidate's performance. This would be considered personal coaching, and would constitute an unfair advantage for those who take the exam more than once.

Those candidates who pass the Oral Assessment receive an Immediate Conditional Offer and proceed to the next phase of the hiring process. Successful candidates receive a briefing on the

next steps in the Foreign Service Specialist Selection Process, including information on the security background investigation, language bonus point system, veteran's preference points, the medical examination, and final suitability review. Candidates are also given the opportunity to ask questions about Foreign Service life. Diplomatic Security may then initiate background interviews.